

Martha Baden has been selected as the 2015 Yavapai First Things First Champion for Young Children.

The award is given to local champions who actively volunteer their time to raise public awareness of the importance of early childhood development and health. Champions spend a significant amount of time volunteering with FTF and building public awareness about the importance of early childhood issues.

The reasons Baden was chosen include:



- Volunteers with First Things First via participation on the Yavapai Outreach Advisory workgroup.
- Assisted First Things First with efforts to build awareness of early childhood programs and services among priority audiences. To that end, Baden frequently collaborates with First Things First grantees and has helped to organize several site tours in partnership with the First Things First funded program *Raising A Reader*. She has also invited First Things First-supported Home Visitation programs to recruit parents at library story-times and has prominently displayed and helped to distribute First Things First materials, including Birth to Five Helpline information in the library's children's area.
- Spearheaded and coordinated the community "Book Nook" project, which provides free books for a variety of ages, including those for young children, in the lobbies and hallways of Prescott organizations, further demonstrating her commitment to family and early literacy.

We recently caught up with Baden who works as the Public Services Manager for the Prescott Public Library.

Question: Why do you feel Early Childhood development and health is so important?

Answer: People are at their most vulnerable as young children and during these same years, birth to five years old, there are also undergoing the most important time for brain development of any time in their lives. If we could ensure all children, ages birth through five, had safe, nurturing and healthy environments during these years, our entire society would look very different than it does today. If we can't provide what is fundamental for the most vulnerable members of our society, what does that say about us?

Q: What caused you to get involved in efforts to increase public awareness in early childhood issues?

A: Although I have always been passionate about books and young children, my experience as a school librarian in a Title I elementary school in Louisiana was life changing. That experience made clear to me the critical importance of nutrition, health care, a nurturing home environment and daily exposure to books for young children. I saw an incredibly talented and dedicated staff scrambling to teach children and get them ready for state standardized testing when it was clear that these children were severely disadvantaged from their very first day at school. There were not enough days in the school year to overcome the obstacles these children faced.

Q: Why do you feel building awareness in early childhood and developmental health is so important for families and communities?

A: Because I don't think the problems our families face are insurmountable. There is a huge body of research that tells us what needs to be done. Education about early childhood development for parents and caregivers of young children is critical. Health care and nutrition for young children is critical. Exposure to language and literature is critical. There are many ways we can accomplish these three things, but not if the public doesn't understand the importance of the first five years of life. We simply can't ignore years of research and experience and risk the well-being and futures of children in our community.

Q: How have you seen awareness for the early years change in your community?

A: The biggest change I have seen concerning awareness has been here in Arizona. First Things First has done a tremendous job in our area of becoming a clearinghouse for information and a unifying area for groups that have similar missions. Both grassroots and national efforts heighten awareness and are empowered and strengthened by the leadership of FTF. FTF, through funding, facilitation of relationships, distribution of information and creating connections amongst area groups has created a kind of synergy that has defiantly increased awareness.

Q: How do you suggest other people in your community get involved?

A: I think it's wonderful to support early childhood groups with charitable giving, and those opportunities abound, but I also think it's crucial for our citizens to throw their political weight behind the young child. Support the funding and the efforts of First Things First and the groups it supports. They all have active Facebook pages and websites which do a great job of getting information out there. Support publicly funded preschool education—this is key to ensuring all children are ready for school. Support the public library— it is one of the few institutions in our society that offers all families of young children the same opportunity to read, grow and learn

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About First Things First – First Things First is a voter-created, statewide organization that funds early education and health programs to help kids be successful once they enter kindergarten. Decisions about how those funds are spent are made by local councils staffed by community volunteers. To learn more, visit azftf.gov.